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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 001935

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KDEM KISL MY

SUBJECT: SARAWAK: OPPOSITION ADRIPT; INDIGENOUS PEOPLE LACK SERVICES; POLICE REJECT CRITICISM

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 942 B. 05 KUALA LUMPUR 1955

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 b, d.

Summary

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¶1. (C) We met with political opposition leaders, human rights advocates and police during an October 2 visit to Sarawak's state capitol of Kuching. While the nationally active ethnic Chinese opposition party DAP performed well in the May 20 state assembly election, we found the party has not yet articulated its political priorities or legislative goals in Sarawak. Through a combination of the governing coalition's media ownership and control, political and financial patronage, and the DAP's apparent lack of a coherent political agenda, the Barisan Nasional-affiliated governing coalition will likely remain in firm control of Sarawak. With regard to protecting the rights of the state's most vulnerable citizens, one of the 16 commissioners from Malaysia's government-funded national human rights commission (Suhakam) condemned the state's "insufficient support" for impoverished, rural, indigenous persons. Echoing comments we have heard from other Suhakam commissioners, he said the government largely ignores Suhakam's recommendations. The state's second highest ranking cop told us that police leaders remain vehemently opposed to the contents of last year's police commission report, and they see no need for establishment of an independent oversight body. He said the government has heavily criticized the police without providing the funding necessary to build a more effective police force. End Summary.

The Drifting Chinese Opposition

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¶2. (C) In Sarawak's May 20 state assembly election, the ethnic Chinese party DAP increased its representation from one seat to six, thereby establishing itself as the main opposition party in the state's 71 seat assembly (ref A). We met with two of those DAP representatives, lawyers Chong Chieng Jen and Violet Yong. Chong and Yong stated that during the run-up to the May 20 election, while the English-language media acted almost entirely as a mouthpiece for the state's long-governing National Front constituent parties, the Chinese-language media "provided a surprising amount of coverage" for opposition candidates. They claimed the primary campaign issue among their constituents was "corruption by Chief Minister Taib and his cronies." Chong said over 1,500 postal votes were recorded in his district by military men posted outside Sarawak, and he claimed "about 99% of them voted against me." When asked why the National Front coalition didn't simply increase the number of postal voters to ensure victory for its candidate, he stated, "They only have a limited total number of postal votes to apportion to the various electoral districts, and they simply misallocated."

¶3. (C) Chong and Yong said the Sarawak state assembly meets for only 16 days per year. They questioned the state government's ongoing RM300 million (\$82 million) construction project to build a 27-storey state assembly building. The new structure will remain largely empty during the 349 days when the assembly is not in session. They said Sarawak's Chief Minister Taib Mahmud ensured the construction contract was awarded to Cahaya Mata, a large holding company that is majority-owned by Taib's family. Upon being awarded the construction contract for RM300 million, Cahaya Mata hired a subcontracting firm to complete the construction for RM220 million; Cahaya Mata (and the Taib family) pocketed the RM80 million (\$22 million) difference. The DAP politicians told us Taib, whose liver cancer was reportedly brought into remission earlier in 2006, "will likely die in office." While the DAP representatives described election fraud in great detail and articulated their opposition to government corruption, they could not (or would not) tell us of their political agenda. Although we asked them several times to define their political goals, we left the meeting with the impression that the DAP has no legislative plans or detailed political priorities - other than maintenance of their seats in the next state election.

Enfeebled Suhakam Fights Losing Battle

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¶4. (C) Dr. Mohammad Herman Ritom Abdullah, Suhakam Commissioner for the state of Sarawak, told us that most of Suhakam's work in the state for

¶5. (C) Indigenous persons account for over half of Sarawak's population, but they lack political power. Abdullah explained, "There are plenty of indigenous leaders in the state government, but they can't do anything without the consent of the Chief Minister." He said Taib appoints "compliant local leaders" from various tribes into "financially rewarding" government positions as a means to stifle potential opposition. Taib belongs to the Melanau indigenous tribe and has been in power for the past 25 years. Embassy sources outside the government uniformly characterize him as highly corrupt. Abdullah said Taib has done little to assist the state's indigenous peoples as they attempt to establish legal ownership of their ancestral lands and defend themselves against encroachment by logging companies. Taib and his relatives are widely thought to

extract a percentage from most major commercial contracts - including those for logging - awarded in the state. Abdullah's efforts to represent the concerns of Sabah's impoverished indigenous peoples have fallen on deaf ears. He stated flatly, "The government doesn't listen to us or act on our advice."

All Stick and No Carrot for Police

16. (C) Sarawak's Deputy Police Commissioner, Kuik Alias Harris, told us on October 2 in Kuching that the federal government "has done little for us other than to criticize our work." We discussed the government-sponsored police commission report published in May 2005 that was highly critical of police corruption, incompetence and prisoner abuse (ref B). Waving his finger in the air and leaning forward for emphasis, he said police leaders "are 101 percent against (the report's) findings." National police leaders have been highly critical, both privately and publicly, of efforts to establish an Independent Police Complaints and Misconduct Commission (IPCMC) that would investigate reports of police abuse, use of deadly force during apprehension of suspects, deaths in police custody and the generally high level of corruption that pervades the force. While Harris welcomed public comments by government officials that salaries, living quarters and equipment for police must be improved, he said little had been done thus far by the government in these areas.

17. (C) The head of Sarawak's Special Branch, Khariri Jaafar, added, "The country's police stations are falling apart." He criticized the lack of funding for police facilities and equipment, calling the situation "demoralizing." He told us to visit the police station in Dang Wangi that handles the center of Kuala Lumpur. He said, "I wouldn't spend one day working there." Harris concluded, "It's hard for us to do our jobs. The current situation is frustrating."

Comment  
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18. (C) Comments from the DAP politicians and Suhakam reinforce what we have heard from other Sarawak state leaders and national politicians. E  
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